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March 3, 2011

Senator Toni Harp  
Chair of the Appropriation Committee for Bill #6380  
300 Capitol Avenue, Room 5100  
Hartford CT 06106

Re: House Bill #6380

Respected Senator Harp, Senator Prague, and Committee Members

I am writing in opposition of House Bill #6380. I became blind during kindergarten due to cancer. My parents knew beforehand that I would become blind, so they sought the help of the Board of Education and Services for the Blind. The transition from seeing to not seeing was smooth, my teacher of the visually impaired (TVI) made it easy for me. Since people already knew I was going blind, she taught me pre-braille skills.

After fourth grade, I moved from Danbury to Newtown and started school there. The transition went well my teachers were well-informed by my TVI about my needs. My TVI did the exact same thing with every teacher that I had. I did not realize at that time how hard being blind could have been in school if she had not been there to help me. I did not realize it until I moved to Ottawa, Canada after seventh grade.

In the Province of Ontario, Canada the education system for the blind and visually impaired students are not central like it is now in Connecticut through BESB. Every school board had to provide for the services and equipment for a blind student. I could not attend my local high school because they did not have the resources to support me. I was enrolled in a school 30 minutes away from home. It was lucky that I got accepted at the school else I would have had to go to a school with no support for me.

Even the support I receive was not enough comparing to support given here in Connecticut. My TVI was very one-sided about helping blind student. Any work that I received with pictures or diagrams or graphs would be eliminated. My TVI thought that pictures were "too complicated" for me to understand. This would greatly impact my learning, for I am a visually learner. I requested that they purchase a tactile image enhancer, and they have used it for assignment from then on. The lack of a tactile image enhancer was due to the fact that there is no centralized system in Ontario.

In Ottawa, there was very little mobility training for the blind students. My mobility

instructor's goal was for me to learn how to ride the city bus system and for me to ask for assistance. My goals were different. I wanted to learn how to be an independent traveler with my cane, which is what I was learning in Connecticut. I even discussed my goals of going to university and being independent with my mobility teacher. But that we could not do those things because he did not have the proper training for teaching me those skills.

There was another blind student at the same school who was two years ahead of me. She did not use her cane outside of school. She would actually forget her cane at home several times, especially after vacation. She was always dependent on other people to guide her around, even when she had her cane with her. When she came across an obstacle, she would immediately turn to the person next to her and ask for help, instead of trying to figure it out herself. My mobility teacher would consider this good enough for mobility, if she was good at asking for help she could go on with life. I, on the other hand, do not like asking people for help. I prefer to figure things out on my own. When I got stuck at something, he would immediately start nagging me to ask people for help. I had no choice but to ask for help because he would not teach me what to do if I ever came across this obstacle again. Fortunately, I learn all of the basic skills from my mobility teacher while I was in Connecticut, so I was able to figure out most of the obstacles myself.

When I was in Ottawa, I went to a presentation where blind students who were in college talked about their college experiences. The first thing they said was that when they entered college, they were completely lost, and had no support. All of them said that in the first week of college, they could not keep up with their work in class because they were too busy trying to figure out the layout of the college and where they could find help when they needed it. This occurred because the education system was divided for blind people. When students graduate from high school, the people they have been working with leave their lives forever. It is like having parents to care for you and give you meals and everything all your life, and then getting dropped off in the middle of nowhere. They were depending on one thing their whole lives, and then had it taken away suddenly. The college students were not eased off of needing someone there to assist them, they were cut off from assistance. The college students said in college they were on their own with no place to get adapted material from. They had to hire their own brailleist to support themselves, which adds that cost on top of the tuition fees for university.

A divided system also affects the teachers teaching the blind students. The year that I left Ottawa, the other blind student was graduating at the same time. Our educational assistant was unsure if she would even have a job next year, for we were both leaving school. During the years I was in Ottawa, both my TVI and EA wanted to help me as much as possible, even though I did not need help. They did this because they wanted to feel needed, and so they felt that they were fulfilling their jobs.

When I moved back to Connecticut, I could not believe how much better everything had become. My teacher of the visually impaired immediately contacted the school, and all my new teachers. We had a meeting where I told everyone my situation. My teacher of the visually impaired encouraged me to interact with the classroom teacher instead of relying on someone else to do it. I have also started looking for colleges. There is a Vocational Rehabilitation Councilor at the Board of Education and Services for the Blind (BESB) here in Connecticut. He gives me useful information for continuing my education in university. I have learned that BESB will help braille some of the math material that I will study in University, for there is no way to do math on the computer yet. The Vocational Rehabilitation Councilor also has guided me in what to look for in support services in College. Before I talked with him, I was completely lost in how to approach colleges.

In conclusion, I believe that the quality of support given to blind students here in Connecticut would suffer without a centralized system. I have personally experience with a system similar to the one that is being proposed in bill #6380. I will tell you that the system will not work for the students, for the families, and for the teachers themselves.

Respectfully yours,

Ayesha Ali